



Journal of Communication and Cultural Trends (JCCT)

Volume 3 Issue 1, Spring 2021

ISSN_(P): 2706-9141 ISSN_(E): 2706-915X

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jcct>

Issue DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jcct.31>

Homepage: <https://journals.umt.edu.pk/index.php/jcct/Home>

Article: **A Study of Endurance and Aspiration in Maya Angelou's Caged Bird (1968) and Still I Rise (1978)**

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Pub. Online: Spring 2021

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jcct.31.04>

Article History: Received: Oct 16, 2020
Revised: April 12, 2021
Accepted: April 12, 2021

To cite this article: Aslam, H. (2021). A study of endurance and aspiration in Maya Angelou's Caged Bird (1968) and Still I Rise (1978). *Journal of Communication and Cultural Trends*, 3(1), 54–65.
[Crossref](#)

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A publication of the
Institute of Communication and Cultural Studies
University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

A Study of Endurance and Aspiration in Maya Angelou's Poems *Caged Bird* (1968) and *Still I Rise* (1978)

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Abstract

The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou (1994) manifests that Maya Angelou's personal consciousness and public awareness sharpened her poetic capabilities. She used art to communicate the pathos and joys of her evolving spirit. This research paper explores the elements of survival, that is, endurance and aspiration in her poetry. The only freedom she enjoyed was the freedom to write which was rooted in her mind and not curbed by societal forces. The rationale of this paper is to trace how personal struggle and the quest for self-sustaining dignity in Maya Angelou's poetry serves as an aspiration for America's black community. Her cerebral autobiographies manifest her struggle for survival in a hostile and racist social environment and her poetry reflects the same. The objective of this research is to locate the motifs of endurance and aspiration in two of her poems namely *Caged Bird* (1994) and *Still I Rise* (1994) from her anthology of *Complete Collected Poems* (1994). *Caged Bird* has become legendary due to the use of strong images, dichotomy and masked metaphors. Through these devices the poetess depicts her span of fragile development. As she grows physically and emotionally she discards her old mask and in *Still I Rise*, she presents her self-image with courage. The lyrical qualities of both poems provide soothing and healing power to the black community. In the light of the current analysis, this research paper concludes that the ultra fine resonance with repetition in Angelou's poetry generates strong emotions. At the same time, it becomes a mode of free expression and endurance for the poetess. Furthermore, the outcome of this research is that it traces the dynamic elements of aspiration in her poetry through which she gains a voice, a voice to address her pathos with a modulated tone and to introduce the tools for productive survival.

Keywords: feminism, power, racism, pathetic fallacy, resistance

Introduction

Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Johnson on April 4, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri. She grew up in St. Louis and Stamps, Arkansas. She has written well-known memoirs and poems. She never used a specified pattern for writing poetry.

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However she wrote in a dialect known as Black Secular, which is a form of expression related to common English and also used metaphors and imagery that correlate with the themes of slavery in her poems.

She wrote many volumes of poetry which include *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (1993), *And Still I Rise* (1987), *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990), *Shaker Why Don't You Sing?* (1983), *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* (1975), and *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie* (1971) which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. All of these above mentioned poems were published together in one volume of poetry in 1994 titled as *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. The current study is based on her two poems, that is, *Caged Bird* (1994) taken from the anthology *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1994), section name *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* and *Still I Rise* (1994) also taken from the same anthology, section name *And Still I Rise, Part Three: And Still I Rise*.

They deal with the poetess' sense of survival and aspiration while confronting racism, sexism and class discrimination. Her poetry fits in the tradition of American poetry and Afro-American feminist poetry. She uses various literary devices to convey her message of freedom. She addresses the oppression that the black people faced during slavery. They were stripped off their fundamental rights and freedom.

The poetess restores her self-esteem through her lyrical expression which validates her existence. She conveys her message in a picturesque manner richen with images. Her developmental state is evident in the poem *The Caged Bird* (1994) whose title is borrowed from Paul Laurence's poem *Sympathy* (1899). This poem is based on blues-based model in which the verses are followed by constant rhyme like that of a song. On the other hand, Maya Angelou's revolutionary thoughts and state of mind is reflected in the poem *Still I Rise* (1994). The repetition of certain authoritarian words in her poem actually reveals her bold spirit. She also challenges her enemies by introducing call-response form in her poetry. The verse speaks about people putting her down for various reasons and her getting back up again.

The current paper utilizes a systematic, evaluative, explanatory, and qualitative research methodology to find out the important motifs of endurance and aspiration in Maya Angelou's poetry with the use of secondary material, that is, journals and articles for the support of the argument.

Literature Review

Black women are considered inferior in the white community. They are perceived as subjugated beings. This perception of black inferiority and white superiority is

inherent in the language and culture of Americans. Maya Angelou uplifts her status to a certain level so that she may not be perceived as a useless entity. These false stereotypes persist and bring social inequalities. Her resistance brings in hope for a better future. An interview of Maya Angelou published in *The Black scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* depicts the true meaning of endurance in the following words:

Endurance is one thing. I think endurance with output, endurance with productivity is the issue. If one has the fortune, good or bad, to stay alive one endures, but to continue to write books and get them out-that's the productivity and I think that is important to link with endurance (Angelou, [1977](#)).

Her poetry mildly attacks social inequalities; however, she expresses her survival instincts much more powerfully than any other black feminist. "Of the various topics treated in her poetry, the most frequent seem to be love, black men, black women, drugs, religion, and slavery" (Lupton, [2016](#)).

Her poetry celebrates the richness of black culture. It also highlights that survival is not mere existence, it is valuable and productive. Angelou has always paid heed to the productive survival of human beings. According to Lyman B. Hagen, "Angelou's poems are dramatic and lyrical. Her style is open, direct, unambiguous, and conversational. The diction is plain but sometimes the metaphors are quite striking" (Hagen, [1997](#)).

Angelou arises from her third space by the use of her voice. It is also evident in her memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) that she gradually learned the power of language with the help of Mrs. Bertha Flowers. Poetry helped her to overcome her emotional turmoil. As a postmodern poet, she incorporates a unique picturesque manner in her poems for the purpose of delight and learning.

Angelou's poetry depicts that there is a vital need of transformation. Her pathos and joys of life are manifested when she talks about her life and the way she changed herself. Her poem *Still I Rise* reveals the courage of her spirit. Her evolution gives her an assertive tone. This assertive tone reveals the determined nature of all black women. Furthermore, this lucid poem represents the voice of all black women who are enthusiastic to rise against the oppression of white men. The assertive tone in *Still I Rise* shows her pride and conformity which brings scornful looks and bitterness on the faces of the white people who perceive her behavior as threatening.

Furthermore, Angelou celebrates her black identity through her threatening tone in the poem. Hagen (1997) illustrates that Angelou writes about “the pride of blackness and African heritage” (p.118). She indirectly sets an example for the readers to express their own troubles in an intuitive way. On the other hand, she motivates many ordinary people through her passion of survival and endurance.

In spite of the negative and positive reviews, as an African American memoirist and poet, Maya Angelou distinguishes herself by infusing her art with consistent cultural consciousness. Following in the tradition like Hughes who creates a new African American identity, a proud sense of self in his poetry, Angelou speaks out the survival, development, and actualization of African American people confronted by the Anglo-American cultural hegemony with the best of words she can summon (Du, 2014).

Hence, Angelou rids herself of artificially imposed identity. In doing so, she is able to embrace her black and female self, thus freeing the caged bird she was once.

Fortitude and Valor

Angelou’s collection (1994) reveals the personal and political life of Maya Angelou. It also depicts that the transition from childhood to adulthood was marked by many problematic situations. However, Angelou survived in critical situations and amid her survival, she learnt many things. She fought all difficulties to shine through the darkest of times. The phrase, “I’ve got oil wells / Pumping in my living room” (Angelou, 1994) harks back to the time when horrible rebellious warfare took place for oil. Governments sold it to the aristocrats and poor class remained deprived. The tussle over oil left the poor people hopeless but Maya Angelou remained firm and bold amidst these crises. She kept writing to motivate the black community so that they could forget their sorrows and live a hopeful life.

Like most African American writers, Angelou plays the role of the maker of black culture. To some extent, she helps produce among African Americans the desire to reinterpret their own culture as well as reshape their self-identity. Angelou assures that the black writers are in positions to inform, to form and to influence. (Du, 2014)

It also represents confidence and the sense of pride the poetess has in herself. Furthermore, in *Still I Rise* (1994) she compares herself with a ‘black ocean’ (Angelou, 1994). She uses this image of ‘Black Ocean’ to reveal the reality of her

personal life. She has confronted the terror and fear and has become strong enough to endure all the problems.

The rhetorical quality of the poem shows the poet's agony towards 'you'. It is like Maya Angelou in *Still I Rise* (1994) is evoking her political voice, asking white oppressors if 'you' envy her (Angelou, 1994). This rhetorical quality induces the women of every era with the challenging spirit of Maya Angelou.

In *Caged Bird* (1994), the metaphor 'caged bird' describes Maya Angelou's fragile balance of life. Geographic displacement, Bailey's intrusion and parental separation in her life illustrates the constant cycle of victories and defeats. Yet, she is not entirely defeated because the 'caged bird' can sing the lyrical rhythm of freedom. Her experiences serve to boost her fragile self to a great extent. Afro-Americans suffered slavery and the brutal treatment of whites and as blacks they were subjugated at every level.

While writing poetry, history and sorrow has filled Maya Angelou's heart with pain. Jeffrey Kluger, editor in *Time*, appreciated the courageous spirit of Maya Angelou in her article "*Maya Angelou: And Still I Rise*" because Maya Angelou asserted that "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again." Time-Why Maya Angelou Matters More Than Ever (Time, 2017). Therefore, self-confidence and self-sustainability came to Maya Angelou through the experiences of life. Joanne M. Braxton, illustrated in A *Casebook* on Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* that

In the eyes of predominantly white and male culture, women, and particularly black women, speak as 'others', which is to say that, at least as far as the awareness of the dominant group is concerned, the black women speaks from a position of marginality. And yet against, all odds, she comes to self-awareness and finds herself at the center of her own experience. (Maya, 1999).

Although the author lives in a tough age for black women, she is able to endure the problems of the age by her great confidence, resistance and aspiration. From her poetic verses, the modern reader can ascertain whatever the circumstances may come, there's always a hope and a desire. The poem *Caged Bird* also shows the courageous spirit of Maya Angelou. Though she compares herself with the caged bird, she has courage and dreams. These dreams are going to serve an important purpose in the future. Her learning in the cage will assist her in later life.

African Americans in this poem are compared to be "Caged Bird", while their repressed ethnic culture is symbolized by the "clipped wings." In fact,

their culture and customs are more or less wiped out because these are in conflict with the dominant culture that is imposed on them. (Du, [2014](#))

The poetess at the end of the poem *Caged Bird* indicates that the ‘caged bird’ “stands on the grave of dreams” (Angelou, [1994](#)). The bird in the poem refers to Maya Angelou herself who has so many dreams that have died because she was never inclined towards freedom. On the other side, all her white counterparts were able to achieve their dreams. Therefore, racial discrimination, displacement and racial prejudice made up her prison and although she opened her mouth to sing, she felt that her song remained unheard in the wide world and was heard only by those nearest her cage. The mode she utilizes is significant, that is, her voice, she sings and elaborates her expression, articulation and her enthusiasm for liberty is unique for self-growth. It would lead to success deliberately. Joanne M. Braxton illustrated in *A Casebook* on Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*,

Maya Angelou offers her readers the possibility that they might experience the fullness of their own lives and be baptized into an awareness of the mystery and wonder what it means to live and breathe and love and walk this earth of terrible and terrifying beauty. Here is a road map that cries out for each reader to reinvent herself-in short, [to] become her own mother. (Maya, [1999](#)).

Her voice is the only feature that can be utilized behind bars. She is ready to do everything for her survival. She never sacrifices her creative instinct and she dares to rise from suppressed status to an elevated one. Her works are a continuous source of hope and pride for every generation.

Protest and Zest for Survival

Although Maya Angelou has gained a prominent status for her autobiographies, she is also a proficient poet. She participates in the life of readers by sharing her life with them. Her experiences enlighten each individual who comes across her poetry. She uses the metaphor of ‘caged bird’ for herself because she has learned to liberate herself from an imposed identity towards a free identity. In the poem *Caged Bird* (1994), she uses an assertive tone to depict her self-image, self-acceptance and self-knowledge. She keeps on struggling under the mask of metaphors to discover her real self. She hides her fragile self under the label of ‘caged bird’ and carries on singing to overcome emotional harm.

She combines language and a specific structure to fabricate a creative and expressive work. *Caged Bird* is a lyrical and a short poem expressing personal

thoughts and feelings. The severity of the first three lines, in succeeding a rhyming scheme, depicts the imprisonment of the innocent bird.

This poem revolves around the theme of freedom and the continuation of survival. The poetess uses functional metaphors, imagery, and paradoxes to convey these themes. These literary devices in the poem make the reader feel thriving rage and injustice. “Bars of rage” (Angelou, 1994, p. 194) is a literary device, a metaphor that depicts the captivity of innocent slaves all throughout the history. She sets a contrast with ‘free bird’ (Angelou, 1994).

The term ‘caged bird’ was taken from Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem *Sympathy*, published in *Lyrics of the Hearthside* in 1899. It presents an Afro-American woman who learns to cope with the racist attitudes and realities that existed in the segregated South. Angelou believed that singing through poetry sets a person free. The way the ‘caged bird’ opens his ‘throat to sing’. Angelou (1994) shows that the zest of survival is still present among those who are separated from the majority, that is, the ‘white people’. Whites are free; they are ready to dip their wings in ‘orange sun rays’ (Angelou, 1994). At the same time, the ‘caged bird’ is also preparing to confront the reality and societal forces with courage and determination. The first thing the ‘caged bird’ has to utilize is his ‘voice’, so he dares to sing to stand outside the bars.

Through the phrase ‘his wings are crippled’ (Angelou, 1994) and his ‘feet are tired’ Angelou (1994) gives a glimpse of the poetess’ own life. She was controlled by her family and brother Bailey. On the other side, the white majority never acknowledged her existence because she was poor, black and a woman. The act of singing acknowledges the presence of voice. For the ‘caged bird’, the song of ‘freedom’ elaborates valuable preparation and resistance under the hardships. Women are preparing themselves to get rid of entrapment and masked metaphors.

Still I Rise (1994) affirms her status as an accomplished woman because she has learned from her experiences and is ready to celebrate the richness of her own culture. The tone of the poem is triumphant which depicts how self-assured she has become. She is ready to challenge the people who attempted to keep her down. In this poem, she uses the phrase “I rise” Angelou (1994) repeatedly. This means that she will always rise no matter what obstacle comes in her way. She emphasizes hope and confidence that is built up in her spirit. “Like the Protestant hymn and like the blues, Angelou’s poems often introduce a major clause that is repeated throughout the remaining stanzas” (Lupton, 2016).

She uses the same phrase repeatedly throughout the poem. This means that no matter what happens she will always rise. She emphasizes how much hope and self-confidence she has eventually gained. The mood of the lucid poem *Still I Rise* (1994) sets a challenging atmosphere bringing in mild protest.

The word rise appears ten times in the poem and is a constant rhyme word. The accumulation of rising sounds creates an upward movement, a worldly resurrection. Both in her poetry and in her prose Angelou was captivated by the notion of rising, an idea that is implied in the UP-word of her 2002 autobiography, *A Song Flung Up*. Her concept of rising seems to echo the Old and New Testaments, the Baptist Hymnal, the Negro spiritual, and other sources. (Lupton, [2016](#)).

The words ‘cutting’, ‘shooting’, ‘killing’, and ‘hatefulness’ have been used by Maya Angelou to speak directly to her enemies. It shows how brutal ‘you’ were in treating ‘me’ and how beautifully ‘I’ endured it (Angelou, [1994](#)).

Power of Expression, Audacity, and Black Beauty

In the early 1960s, when black women in America were treated as mere objects, they suffered brutal racial discrimination at every level. But then, rebellious black women appeared on the horizon and one of those brave women was Maya Angelou with an impregnable determination and a well-fortified soul. She proceeded as a spokesperson of the black community and her works are considered not only as representative of the black culture but also as a defense of this culture.

She appreciates her bodily features in her poetry. Her hair is kinky and pure black, as she indirectly states about her hair in her poem *Caged Bird* (Angelou, 1994). She illustrates that her hair is nappy black and people symbolize her hair with black wool. After getting free from her cage, she recognizes the worth of being black. It is a symbol of her heritage. The same happened with Beneatha in the novel *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) written by Lorraine Hansberry. In the novel, she feels an inferiority complex when her hair is discussed (Hansberry, [1994](#)). Through Asagi, a native Negro, she learns about her African roots and heritage. Furthermore, Asagi illustrates the fact that kinky hair represents her originality. Maya Angelou learns the same lesson and she starts loving her own self. Ama Yawson in her article “*Maya Angelou and the gift of being born a black woman*” illustrates this fact in the following words:

If you have the privilege of being born a black woman, it is my belief, that it is a part of your divine mission to liberate yourself from all external and internalized oppression and thereby liberate the world. Mother Maya

Angelou and the words of other writers like her, provide the key to that liberation. (Yawson, [2017](#)).

When Lady Michelle Obama, former president Bill Clinton and Oprah Winfrey were three of the biggest names to speak at a memorial service organized for honoring the late poet, author, and civil rights activist Maya Angelou. Obama gave a very personal tribute to Angelou, who died on May 28, 2014 at the age of 86 years. Michelle Obama elaborated that her poem *Phenomenal Woman* changed the way she saw herself. Following is an important chunk of Michelle Obama's speech:

I was struck by how she celebrated black women's beauty like no one had ever dared before. Our curves, our stride, our strength, our grace. Her words were clever and sassy; they were powerful and sexual and boastful. And in that one singular poem, Maya Angelou spoke to the essence of black women, but she also graced us with an anthem for all women—a call for all of us to embrace our God-given beauty. (Sklar, [2014](#)).

Obama offered revealing insights about how she and other black women sometimes define their beauty in the context of the larger societal standards. Likewise, Maya Angelou's collection of poetry is a celebration of black beauty because the readers weeps, falls and becomes elated and rejoices with Maya as she guides the reader through the journey of her life.

Maya Angelou never feels ashamed of her vital body organs as depicted by the phrase in the poem *Still I Rise*. The phrase "I've got diamonds / At the meeting of my thighs?" (Angelou, [1994](#)). She celebrates her sexuality and never feels ashamed of it. She feels sexy as a counterblow act towards the hatred of the white people. She dauntlessly acknowledges the worth of her body parts and directly tries to connect with the envious misogynist men judging her body. Her audacious attitude provides a point of productive genesis for the coming generations. Ama Yawson in her article "*Maya Angelou and the gift of being born a black woman*" illustrates it as follows:

And with her words as the soundtrack to our lives, we should walk through the world with our beautiful kinky-haired heads held high while smiling with our thick lips and sashaying with our black girl hips. We can then, in the words of NtozakeShange, come out, know ourselves, know our own voices and know our infinite beauty (Yawson, [2017](#)).

The poetess has honored her body with her words. She gives up herself entirely because she wants that her poetry should serve as a source of inspiration for every

black girl. Ama Yawson in her article “*Maya Angelou and the gift of being born a black woman*” illustrates it in the following words:

As we embrace our beauty, we become living and breathing monuments to the fact that there are no formulas for beauty. As we own our magnificence, we demonstrate the magnificence and equality of all human beings. Moreover, as we achieve feats heretofore unimagined, we bear witness to the fact that we all “still rise. (Yawson, [2017](#)).

Her purpose of writing is to express her own vulnerable humanity through a series of agonizing autobiographies so that others would feel empowered and motivated to come forward and express the hardships they have gone through, rather than suppressing their feelings and emotions.

Conclusion

Maya Angelou, an iconic figure, is survived through music, dance, art, endurance, and literature. The major aspect of her personality was the fact that she fearlessly acknowledged the truth and forwarded it to the world. Endurance and aspiration gradually paved the path for her future gains. The struggle was accomplished through personal interpretations of things and political participation into public affairs. As an Afro-American woman she elevated her status by means of literature, particularly poetry. The conquest of Maya Angelou lies in her patience and determination. The selected poems successfully explore the survival strategies used by her with the help of various ingredients such as pain, music, courage, and hope utilized as armor in life. Liberty and freedom of expression come through explorations and experimentations. If her spirit was locked up in a cage, she kept her fight going because at that time freedom demanded a responsibility from her. Self-restrained approach serves the best in the worst circumstances. This is the crux of Maya Angelou’s poetry and she becomes a mark of gratification, that is, “I Rise”. She specifically addresses black women that they should never surrender and fight to the last. These are the experiences that illuminate one’s future life.

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